

Review #72 : *La Comédie du Bonheur* (1938)

Louis Jourdan and Micheline Presle in an optimist comedy about love and happiness

CLIP

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iC2Hgf74xiE>

A joint French-Italian production, released first in Italy in 1940 and in France in the summer of 1942, *La Comédie du Bonheur* (*Ecco La Felicità* or *The Comedy of Happiness*) was based on Russian dramatist Nicholas Everinoff's *Samoe glavnoe* (*The Chief Thing*) with new dialogues by Jean Cocteau – in which an escape from an insane asylum takes residence in a boarding house, and to cheer his fellow lodgers, stages a **musical production**, promoting his theories about **life being a stage**. Filmed in Rome, and set during Mardi Gras celebrations, the film features international superstar of the day, **Ramon Novarro**, and **Louis Jourdan** in his first appearance : the first scene in which he appears instantly demonstrates the **magnetic screen quality** that made him a star.



SYNOPSIS

Wealthy banker Jourdain (**Michel Simon**) starts spending his money on philanthropic purposes, so his relatives have him committed to a psychiatric clinic to save their inheritance. Jourdain escapes from the institution, and, back in Nice during Mardi Gras celebrations, has the intention of once again benefiting humanity with a few well-placed sums of money. He takes residence in a boarding house, which is inhabited by several miserable individuals who could benefit from his good will, including the ugly Lydia, the suicidal Russian Fedor, and bitter old spinster Miss Aglaé. Without delay, Jourdain hires actors under the direction of Deribin to take up residence with the aim of brightening the lives of its gloomy inmates: ‘*My theater, he tells them, has no stage left or stage right. My theater is life.*’

As the lead, juvenile Félix (**Ramon Novarro**) begins romancing Lydia (**Micheline Presle**) to improve her self-esteem. Felix's wife Anita (**Jacqueline Delubac**) uses her feminine wiles to convince Fedor (**Louis Jourdan**), a suicidal Russian émigré, that life is worth living and Deribin (**Alerme**) has the most challenging task of all, to tame and cheer up the embittered old spinster Miss Aglaé (**Sylvie**). They will all fall in love and soon discover that they don't play anymore : they live. Meanwhile, Jourdain's family has offered a 50,000 Fr. reward for anyone who can find their uncle before he squanders their entire fortune...



REVIEW

This film, **ambitious and philosophical**, verges on the **fantasy** genre, paving a reliable way for **Marcel L'Herbier's** war days peak *La Nuit Fantastique*, where he directed Micheline Presle again, and one can only deplore he did not use again the handsome Louis Jourdan, the

Alain Delon of that era, instead of an aging Fernand Gravey. **Marcel L'Herbier** is quite forgotten today, despite all the **stunning movies** he shot. *La Comédie du Bonheur* is also unjustly forgotten, because it is a **brilliant baroque movie** – as in baroque stage plays, life is a stage and stage is life – worth the best of **Max Ophüls** : there is the same use of characters running along stairs and balconies, of masks and lies. L'Herbier's direction shows much **flair and poetry**, the film is **attractively photographed** – the physical change of each character is a wonder to behold – and there are **enthusiastic contributions from a superb cast**.

The film's most interesting aspect is its carefree demolition of the fourth wall in the final act. The idea of a **play within a play**, having the characters in the main story step out of the frame in the last reel and loop back to the opening (set in a TV studio) for a stunning denouement was, for the time, quite an innovation... to the entire credit of script-writer **Jean Cocteau**.

The cast at first seems incredibly incongruous. *Michel Simon and Ramon Novarro in the same film* ? How that came about is anyone's guess. After a glittering career in Hollywood in the 1920s as the successor of Rudolph Valentino, *La Comédie du Bonheur* is Novarro's only appearance in a French film. Despite his status as a former screen legend and the fact that he gets to sing a few musical numbers, Novarro is not positioned as the star of the film – in the role of Félix, who opens Lydia's heart. There's a wonderful scene where shots of Micheline's beautiful features alternate with shots of a sculpted angel entering into the morning light as a strong wind progressively destroys the wall which blocked the way to sunrays.

Instead, he forms part of a **remarkable ensemble** which includes theatrical diva **Jacqueline Delubac** as his gentle and witty wife, rising star **Micheline Presle** as sweet Lydia, the young girl who thinks she is ugly, and glamorous *jeune premier* **Louis Jourdan** as the suicidal Russian. Micheline and Louis sparkle on screen but the unambiguous star of the film is **Michel Simon**, delightfully funny in one of those *sympathetic outsider* roles for which he was particularly well-suited. As Simon's amiable Monsieur Jourdain guides the destinies of the unhappy folk around him towards what he believes will be a happy outcome, you can scarcely conceive that a real-life madman in nearby Germany was bracing himself to accomplish a similar feat at approximately the same time – with a somewhat less humorous outcome.

You will love the uncluttered pureness of the photography, the witty dialogues, sometimes funny and cynical, sometimes poignant, and there's a stunning ending scene at a masked ball. Why is it that this film hasn't been made to DVD yet ? It's just incredible ! +++

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=io-7lj19YaM>